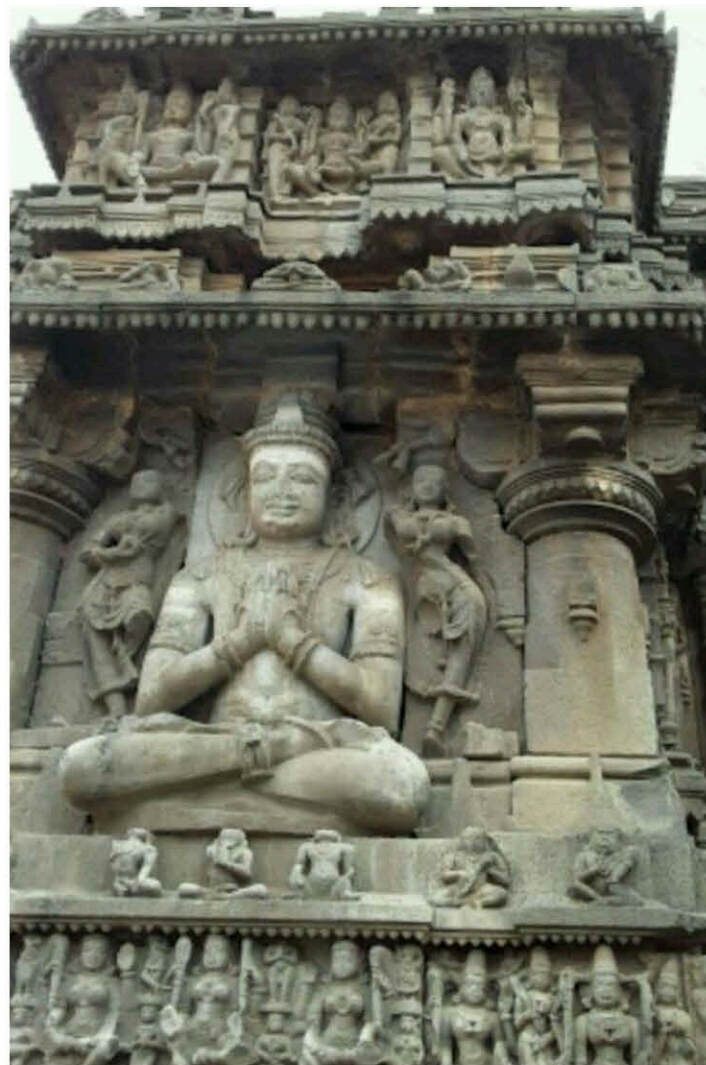


The Details about "Hindu Iconoclasm"



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A remarkable aspect of the Ayodhya debate is the complete lack of active involvement by Western scholars. Their role has been limited to that of loudspeakers for the secularist-cum-Islamist party-line denying that any temple demolition had preceded the construction of the Babri Masjid. Even those who (like Hans Bakker and Peter Van der Veer) had earlier given their innocent support to the historical account, putting the Ayodhya case in the context of systematic Islamic iconoclasm, hurried to fall in line once the secularist campaign of history-rewriting started.

Given the widely acknowledged importance of the Ayodhya conflict, one would have expected at least some of the well-funded Western academics to embark on their own investigation of the issue rather than parroting the slogans emanating from Delhi's Jama Masjid and JNU. Their

behavior in the Ayodhya debate provides an interesting case study of the tendency of establishment institutions and settled academicians to genuflect before ideological authorities over-ruling scholarly procedure in favor of the political fashion of the day.

This is, I fear, equally true of the one Western academic who has substantively contributed to the debate, and whose contribution we will presently discuss.

Massive Evidence of Temple Destruction

One Western author who has become very popular among India's history-writers is the American scholar Prof. Richard M. Eaton. Unlike his colleagues, he has done some original research pertinent to the issue of Islamic iconoclasm, though not of the Ayodhya case specifically. A selective reading of his work, focusing on his

explanations but keeping most of his facts out of view, is made to serve the negationist position regarding temple destruction in the name of Islam.

Yet, the numerically most important body of data presented by him concurs neatly with the classic (now dubbed "Hindutva") account. In his oft-quoted paper "Temple desecration and Indo-Muslim states", he gives a list of "eighty" cases of Islamic temple destruction. "Only eighty", is how the secularist history-rewriters render it, but Eaton makes no claim that his list is exhaustive. Moreover, eighty isn't always eighty.

Thus, in his list, we find mentioned as one instance: "1094: Benares, Ghurid army". Did the Ghurid army work one instance of temple destruction? Eaton provides his source and there we read that in Benares, the

Ghurid royal army "destroyed nearly one thousand temples, and raised mosques on their foundations". This way, practically every one of the instances cited by Eaton must be read as actually ten, or a hundred, or as in this case, even a thousand temples destroyed. Even Eaton's non-exhaustive list, presented as part of "the kind of responsible and constructive discussion that this controversial topic so badly needs", yields the same thousands of temple destructions ascribed to the Islamic rulers in most relevant pre-1989 histories of Islam and in pro-Hindu publications.

That part of course is not highlighted in secularist papers exploiting Eaton's work. Far more popular, however, is the spin which Eaton puts in this data: Islam cannot be blamed for the acts of Muslim idol-breakers, the blame lies elsewhere....

Apparently in good faith, but nonetheless in exactly the same manner as the worst Indian history falsifiers, Eaton discusses the record of Islam in India while keeping the entire history of Islam outside of India out of view. This history would show unambiguously that what happened in India was merely a continuation of Prophet Mohammad's own conduct in Arabia and his successors' conduct during the conquest of West and Central Asia.

That the Arabian precedent is ignored is all the more remarkable when you consider that the stated immediate objective for Eaton's paper was Sita Ram Goel's endeavor to "document a pattern of wholesale temple destruction by Muslims in the pre-British period". Goel's elaborately argued thesis, telling left unmentioned here by Eaton, is precisely that Islamic iconoclasm in India follows a pattern set in the preceding

centuries in West Asia and accepted as normative in Islamic doctrine. Eaton's glaring omission of this all-important precedent makes his alternative explanation of Islamic iconoclasm in India suspect beforehand.

Hindu Iconoclasm?

Instead of seeking the motives of the Islamic idol-breakers in Islam, Eaton seeks it elsewhere: in Hinduism. He admits that during the Hindu re-conquest of Muslim-occupied territories: "Examples of mosque desecrations are strikingly few in number." Yet, in his opinion, Hindus had been practicing their own very specific form of iconoclasm in earlier centuries. Though they themselves seem to have lost the habit by Shivaji's time, it was this Hindu tradition which the Muslim invaders copied: "The form of desecration that showed the greatest

continuity with pre-Turkish practice was the seizure of the image of the defeated king's state deity and its abduction to the victor's capital as a trophy of war."

One of the examples cited is this: "When Firuz Tughluk invaded Orissa in 1359 and learned that the region's most important temple was that of Jagannath located inside the raja's fortress in Puri, he carried off the stone image of the god and installed it in Delhi 'in an ignominious position'." And likewise, there are numerous instances of idols built into footpaths, lavatories and other profane positions. This is not disputed, but can any Hindu precedent be cited for it?

The work for which Indian secularists are most grateful to Eaton, is his digging up of a few cases of what superficially appears to be of Hindu iconoclasm: "For, while it is true that contemporary Persian sources routinely

condemn idolatory (but-parasti) on religious grounds, it is also true that attacks on images patronized by enemy kings had been, from about the sixth century A.D. on, thoroughly integrated into Indian political behavior."

Because a state deity's idol was deemed to resonate with the state's fortunes (so that its accidental breaking apart was deemed an evil omen for the state itself), the generalization of idol worship in temples in the first millennium A.D. oddly implied that "early medieval history abounds in instances of temple desecration that occurred amidst inter-dynastic conflicts."

If the "eighty" (meaning thousands of) cases of Islamic iconoclasm are only a trifle, the "abounding" instances of Hindu iconoclasm, "thoroughly integrated" in Hindu political culture, can reasonably be expected to number tens of thousands. Yet, Eaton's list, given without reference to primary sources,

contains, even in a maximalist reading (i.e., counting "two" when one king takes away two idols from one enemy's royal temple), only 18 individual cases. This even includes the case of "probably Buddhist" idols installed in a Shiva temple by Govinda III, the Rashtrakuta conqueror of Kanchipuram, not after seizing them but after accepting them as a pre-emptive tribute offered by the fearful king of Sri Lanka.

In this list, cases of actual destruction amount to exactly two: "Bengali troops sought revenge on king Lalitaditya by destroying what they thought was the image of Vishnu Vaikuntha, the state deity of Lalitaditya's kingdom in Kashmir", and: "In the early tenth century, the Rashtrakut monarch Indra III not only destroyed the temple of Kalapriya (at Kalpa near the Jamuna river) patronized by the Rashtrakutas' deadly enemies the Pratiharas,

but took away special delight in recording the fact."

The latter is the only instance of temple destruction in the list, even though rehotical sleight-of-hand introduces it as representative of a larger phenomenon:

"While the dominant pattern here was one of looting royal temples and carrying off images of state deities, we also hear of Hindu kings engaging in the destruction of royal temples of their adversaries."

So, what is the "dominant pattern" in the sixteen remaining cases? As we saw in the case of the Lankan idols in Kanchipuram, the looted (or otherwise acquired) idols were respectfully installed in a temple in the conqueror's seat of power, e.g., a solid image of Vishnu Vaikuntha, seized earlier by the Pratihara king Herambapala, "was seized from the Pratiharas by the Candella

king Yasovarman and installed in the Lakshamana temple of Khajuraho". So, the worship of the image continued, albeit in a new location; and the worship of the old location was equally allowed to continue, albeit with a new idol as the old and prestigious one had been taken away. In both places, the existing system of worship was left intact.

This is in radical contrast with Islamic iconoclasm, which was meant to disrupt Hindu worship and symbolize or announce its definite and complete annihilation. There is no case of an Islamic conqueror seizing a Hindu idol and taking it to his capital for purposes of continuing its worship there. Hindu conquerors did not want to destroy or even humiliate or disrupt the religion of the defeated state. On the contrary, in most cases, the winning and the defeated party shared the same religion and were in no

mood to dishonor it in any way. The situation with Islamic conquerors is quite the opposite.

That is why Eaton fails to come up with the key evidence for his thesis of a native Hindu origin of Muslim iconoclasm. He can show us not a single document testifying that a Muslim conqueror committed acts of iconoclasm in imitation of an existing local Hindu tradition. On the contrary, when Islamic iconoclasts cared to justify their acts in writing, it was invariably with reference to the Islamic doctrine and the Prophet's precedents of idol-breaking and of the war of extermination against idolatry.

No advanced education and specialist knowledge is required to see the radical difference between the handful of cases of alleged Hindu iconoclasm and the thousands of certified Islamic cases of proudly self-

described iconoclasm. It is like the difference between an avid reader stealing a book from the library and a barbarian burning the library down. In one case, an idol is taken away from a temple, with respectful greetings to an officiating priest, in order to re-install it in another temple and restart its worship. In the other case, an idol is taken away from the ruins of a temple, with a final kick against the priest's severed head, in order to install it in a lavatory for continuous profanation and mockery. Of the last two sentences, a secularist only retains the part that "an idol is taken away from the temple", and decides that it's all the same.

For Prof. Eaton's information, it may be recalled that an extreme willful superficiality regarding all matters religious is a key premise of Nehruvian secularism. While such an anti-scholarly attitude may be understandable in the case of political

activists parachuted into academic positions in Delhi, there is no decent reason why an American scholar working in the relative quiet of Tuscon, Arizona, should play their game.

Temples and Mosques as Political Centers

Prof. Eaton develops at some length the secularist theory that temple destruction came about, not as the result of an "essentialized 'theology of iconoclasm' felt to be intrinsic to the Islamic religion", but as an added symbolic dimension of the suppression of rebellions. In some cases this has an initial semblance of credibility, e.g., "Before marching to confront Shivaji himself, however, the Bijapur general [Afzal Khan] first proceeded to Tuljapur and desecrated a temple dedicated to the goddess

Bhavani, to which Shivaji and his family had been personally devoted."

Yet, the theory breaks down when the fate of mosques associated with rebellion are considered. Eaton himself mentions cases which ought to have alerted him to the undeniably religious discrimination in the decision of which places of worship to desecrate, e.g., Aurangzeb destroyed "temples in Jodhpur patronized by a former supporter of Dar Shikoh, the emperor's brother and arch rival". But Dara Shikoh surely also had Muslim supporters who did their devotions and perhaps even their intrigue plotting in mosques? Indeed, as a votary of Hindu-Muslim syncretism, he certainly also frequented mosques himself. So why did Aurangzeb not bother to demolish those

mosques, if his motive was merely to punish rebels?

Eaton describes how a Sufi dissident, Shaikh Muhammadi, was persecuted by Aurangzeb for teaching deviant religious doctrines, and sought refuge in a mosque. Aurangzeb managed to arrest him, but did not demolish the mosque. This incident plainly contradicts the secularist claim that if any temple destructions took place at all, the reason was non-religious, viz. the suppression of rebellion located in the temples affected. As per Eaton's own data, we find that intrigues and rebellions involving mosques never led to the destruction of the mosque.

He even admits in so many words: "No evidence, however, suggests that ruling authorities attacked public monuments

like mosques or Sufi shrines that had been patronized by disloyal or rebellious officers. Nor were such monuments desecrated when one Indo-Muslim kingdom conquered another and annexed its territories."

Eaton tries to get around this as follows: "This incident suggests that mosques in Mughal India, though religiously potent, were considered detached from both sovereign terrain and dynastic authority, and hence politically inactive. As such, their desecration could have had no relevance to the business of de-establishing a regime that had patronized them."

One wonders on what planet Eaton has been living lately. In the present age, we frequently hear of mosques as centres of Islamic political activism, not just in

Delhi or Lahore or Cairo but even in New York. Sectarian warfare, as between Shias and Sunnis, always emanated from mosques almost by definition, and inter-Muslim clan or dynastic rivalries likewise crystallized around centers of preaching. The Friday prayers always include a prayer for the Islamic ruler, and the Islamic doctrine never separates political from religious concerns. If Muslim rulers chose to respect the mosques, it was definitely not because they were unconnected to politics.

Eaton continues: "Not surprisingly, then, when Hindu rulers established their authority over territories of defeated Muslim rulers, they did not as a rule desecrate mosques or shrines, as, for example, when Shivaji established a Maratha kingdom on the ashes of

Bijapur's former dominions in Maharashtra, or when Vijayanagara annexed the former territories of the Bahmanis or their successors."

Once people have interiorized a certain framework of interpretation, they become capable of disregarding obvious facts which don't fit their schemes. In this case, when explaining Hindu non-iconoclasm, Eaton insists in the contrived and demonstrably false theory of the political irrelevance of mosques even though a far simpler and well documented explanation is staring him in the face: unlike Muslims, Hindus disapproved of iconoclasm and preferred universal respect for people's religious sensibilities.

Raj Bhoja's Temple

Contrary to the impression created in the secularist media, Prof. Eaton has not even begun to refute Sita Ram Goel's thesis. He manages to leave all the arguments for Goel's main thesis of an Islamic theology of iconoclasm undiscussed. Of Goel's basic data in the fabled list of mosques standing on the ruins of temples, only a single one is mentioned: "an inscription dated 1455, found over the doorway of a tomb-shrine in Dhar, Madhya Pradesh" which mentions "the destruction of a Hindu temple by one Abdullah Shah Chungal during the reign of Raja Bhoja, a renowned Paramara king who had ruled over the region from 1010 to 1053."

In the main text, Eaton seems to be saying that Goel is an uncritical amateur

who "accepts the inscription's reference to temple destruction more or less at face value, as though it were a contemporary newspaper account reporting an objective fact". But in footnote, he has to admit that Goel is entirely aware of the chronological problems surrounding old inscriptions: "Goel does, however, consider it more likely that the event took place during the reign of Raja Bhoja II in the late thirteenth century rather than during that of Raja Bhoja I in the eleventh century."

Either way, the inscription is considerably younger than the events recorded in it. In history, it is of course very common that strictly contemporary records of an event are missing, yet the event is known through secondary younger records. These have to be treated with caution (just like the strictly

contemporary sources, written from a more lively knowledge of the event, but also often in a more distortive partisan involvement in it), yet they cannot be ignored, Eaton makes the most of this time distance, arguing that the inscription is "hardly contemporary" and "presents a richly textured legend elaborated over many generations of oral transmission until 1455". Therefore, "we cannot know with certainty" whether the described temple destruction ever took place.

So, at the time of my writing it has been twelve years since Goel published his list, and exactly one scholar has come forward to challenge one item in the list; who, instead of proving it wrong, settles for the ever-safe suggestion that it could do with some extra research. Given the eagerness of a large and well-funded

crowd of academics and intellectuals to prove Goel wrong, I would say that that meager result amounts to a mighty vindication. And the fact remains that the one inscription that we do have on the early history of the Islamic shrine under discussion, does posit a temple destruction. So far, the balance of evidence is on the side of the temple is on the side of the temple destruction scenario, and if evidence for the non-demolition scenario is simply non-existent.

For argument's sake, we may imagine that Eaton is right, and that the inscription merely invented the temple destruction. That would only mean Eaton is right on this point of detail, but also that the very same inscription proves his main thesis wrong. For, suppose no temple was destroyed, yet

the Islamic inscription claims the opposite. In Eaton's own words: "Central to the story are themes of conversion, martyrdom, redemption and the patronage of sacred sites by Indo-Muslim royalty, as well as, of course, the destruction of a temple." Temple destruction is thus deemed central to Indo-Muslim identity, even to the point where local histories free of real temple destruction would be supplied with imaginary temple destructions, - so as to fit the pattern deemed genuinely Islamic. This would illustrate how the Muslims themselves believed in (and were consequently susceptible to further motivation by) "an essentialized 'theology of iconoclasm' felt to be intrinsic to the Islamic religion" what Eaton dismisses elsewhere as a "wrong" explanation.

For the rest, all that Eaton has done to show against Goel's thesis is that it is based on "selective translations of pre-modern Persian chronicles, together with a selective use of epigraphic data". However, the larger a body of evidence, the harder it becomes to credibly dismiss it as "selective". Goel's hundreds of convergent testimonies cannot be expelled from the discussion so lightly. But improvement is always possible, and we are ready to learn from scholars with higher standards, drawing their conclusions from a wider and less "selective" body of evidence. Unfortunately, Prof. Eaton has failed to cite us any paper or book on Indo-Muslim iconoclasm which is less "selective". His own studies silence on each one of the testimonies cited by Goel amounts to a selective favoritism

towards the data seemingly supporting the secularist theory.

It is of course true that there *are* cases (and Eaton delights the secularists by citing some new ones) where Muslim rulers allowed Hindu temples to function, to be repaired, even to be built anew. This was never disputed by Goel, for these cases of tolerance firstly do not nullify the cases of iconoclasm, and secondly they do not nullify the link between iconoclasm and Islamic theology. Muslim rulers were human beings, and all manner of circumstances determined to what extent they implemented Islamic injunctions. Many were rulers first and Muslims second. Often they had to find a *modus vivendi* with the Hindu majority in order to keep fellow Muslim sectarian or dynastic rivals off their own backs, and in order to

avoid Hindu rebellion. But that is no merit of Islam itself, merely a testimony to the strength which Hindu society retained even at its lowest ebb. To the extent that Muslim rulers took their Islam seriously, a world free of Paganism and idol-temples remained their stated Quranic ideal, but political and military power equations often kept them from actively pursuing it.

Richard Eaton's paper is the best attempt so far to defend the secularist alternative to the properly historical explanation of Islamic iconoclasm as being based on Islamic doctrine. Yet, he fails to offer any data which are incompatible with the latter explanation. There is no reason to doubt his good faith, but like many people with strong convictions, he somehow slips into a selective use of data, contrived

interpretations and special pleading, all converging on a single aim: exculpating Islam itself from its own record of iconoclasm.

According to the cover text on his book, Eaton is professor of History at the University of Arizona and "a leading historian of Islam". Had he defended the thesis that iconoclasm is rooted in Islam itself, he would have done justice to the evidence from Islamic sources, yet he would have found it very hard to get published by Oxford University Press or reach the status of leading Islam scholar that he now enjoys. One can easily become an acclaimed scholar of Hinduism by lambasting and vilifying that religion, but Islam is somehow more demanding of respect.